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Dogmatism, Pragmatism, Essentialism, Relativism: The Boas/Mason Museum Debate Revisited

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FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Dogmatism, Pragmatism, Essentialism, Relativism: The Boas/Mason Museum Debate Revisited

[G.W.S.]

The debate which Franz Boas initiated with Otis Mason and John Wesley Powell in the spring of 1887, shortly after he took up residence in New York City as assistant editor of Science, has long been marked as a pregnant episode in the history of American anthropology. Much of Boas' later critique of evolutionism and his characteristic approach to the study of cultures can be read into the positions advanced, in sometimes imperfect English, in his several contributions to the debate (Stocking 1974; Bunzl 1994; Jacknis 1985; cf. Buettner-Janusch 1957). The provoking issue had both its theoretical and practical aspects. Theoretically, the problem was how to explain the occurrence of "similar inventions in areas widely apart." Recasting the issue in terms that are historically familiar, the problem was whether cultural similarities were to be explained by the migration or diffusion of peoples or ideas, or by "independent invention" and "the psychic unity of mankind." Mason, modelling his anthropology on biological science, and taking as premise that "like causes produce like effects," assumed that the human mind, faced with similar problems in similar environmental situations ("under the same stress and resources") would produce similar devices to perform similar functions. Boas, emphasizing the differences between natural scientific and historical inquiry--and meaning rather than function--insisted that "in ethnology all is individuality." Objects that looked alike might have quite different meanings, whether a rattle was a religious object or simply a children's plaything could only be determined by study the cultural productions of a people as a whole: "from a collection of string instruments, flutes or drums of 'savage' tribes and the modern orchestra, we cannot derive any conclusion but that similar means have been applied by all peoples to make music. The character of their music, the only object worth studying, which determines the form of the instruments, cannot be understood from the single instrument, but requires a complete collection of the single tribe." Practically, the question was how to arrange museum specimens: on the one hand, in evolutionary/functional series of inventions which were presumed to be instances of the solution of a single adaptational problem; on the other, in sets representing a tribal culture, or closely related cultural variants within a single culture area.

My own prior readings of this correspondence have been from the perspective of the cultural thought of Franz Boas, in the development of which his contribution to the debate served as a kind of opening microcosm. With that in mind, I reproduced his half of it in The Shaping of American Anthropology (1974). Recently, however, I have had occasion to reread the correspondence in a more bilateral context, which forced a greater attention to what Mason and Powell had to say (Stocking 1994). What I found most striking is suggested by the four "isms" marked above: pragmatism, dogmatism, essentialism and relativism. Attending more to the voices of Mason and Powell, I noted a contrast between the two sides which might be cast in arch- (or stereo-) typically national character terms. On the one hand, Mason and Powell come across as pragmatic American democrats, appealing for a flexible, functional, utilitarian

arrangement, holding theory lightly, accepting that there might be a variety of approaches and of audiences, and perhaps just a bit patronizing of the arrogant ethnographic novice, who, signing himself as "Dr. Franz Boas" wrapped himself in the authoritative mantle of Germanic scholarship. By contrast to the two merely initialed Americans (O. T. and J. W.), Boas does indeed more dogmatic, more insistent on getting practice articulated with correct theory, more inclined to justify his position by appeal to a particular authority (Adolph Bastian)--with his own authority marked in signature by what was at that time still a characteristically Germanic academic title.

Boas' opening critique, along with his subsequent rejoinder, may be found in The Shaping of American Anthropology (Stocking, ed. 1974:61-67). Mason's response was originally published in Science, 9: 534-35:

The occurrence of similar inventions in areas widely apart

In Science of May 20, Dr. Franz Boas has reviewed in a very courteous manner my plan of studying and exhibiting anthropological material, to which I am happy to make reply.

I think that Dr. Boas honors me overmuch in giving me the entire credit for a system which had taken possession of some men's minds before I was born. As your space will not allow me an extended argument, I shall confine myself to general statements.

1. Whoever attempts to classify material must first have in his mind certain notions, ideas, or characteristics by means of which he will separate one object from another. These ideas let us call "classific concepts."

2. All curators of anthropological museums must recognize the following classific concepts: material, race, geographical areas, social organizations, environment, structure and function, and evolution by elaboration. Besides these, there are other minor concepts which enter into more minute classifications.

3. Every scientific anthropologist charged with a great collection has in his own mind decided the order in which these concepts should be considered in the distribution of material, and I consider this the greatest blessing to science. If all the museums of the world were arranged upon the same plan, only one set of philosophical problems could be considered, and the study would be correspondingly circumscribed. If, however, such a measure becomes necessary, I sincerely hope the plan will be that of the national museum at Washington. Let it be distinctly kept in mind that the only difference among curators is in the degree of prominence given to each concept.

4. There is another factor which enters into the arrangement of material, and that is those who are to study the material. For instance, there are archeologists, ceramists, musicians, technologists of many kinds, and students of war, religion, and the aesthetic arts, who desire to see, in juxtaposition, the specimens they would study. On the other hand, there are ethnologists and sociologists who desire to see all that belongs to a consanguine race, or to a geographical area, in juxtaposition.

One of the most delightful incentives technique as the ruling concept is the great

variety of intelligent people who can be brought into co-operation in the work. It seems that there is something for everybody on earth to do, and I attribute the phenomenal rapid growth, at little cost, of the national museum, to the treat variety of minds that catch its spirit and are glad to work for it in their several spheres.

Now in a museum properly constructed it is possible to arrange the cases in the form of a checkerboard, so that by going in a certain direction the parallels represent races or tribes or locations. By inspecting the same cases in a direction at right angles to the former. the visitor may study all the products of human activity in classes according to human wants. At any rate, whatever the fundamental conception be, in any museum every thing should tend to enlist the sympathies and cooperation of the greatest diversity of mind.

Finally, as regards similarities in the products of industry of areas widely apart, I think Dr. Boas's suggestion about superficial similarities from unlike causes a very ingenious one, but it has nothing to do with the case. Except in a general way, his affirmation that similar effects proceed from different causes will hardly meet with acceptance, in the face of the axiom that 'like effects spring from like causes.'

In another place I have sought to show the gradations of similarities. Superficial, formal, or functional similarities in nature may spring from diametrical opposite motives, as in the case of mimicry. But according to the doctrine of chances, the possibility of similar effects diminishes with the complexity of the organization and the number of co-operating factors.

The perplexing question is this: Can these similarities be made to throw any light upon the migrations of men? The philosophical ethnologist is always in a 'double corner,' by reason of two interpretations of similarities,-- the one arguing contact of some kind; the other, disconnected causes, whether similar or dissimilar it matters not.

I think it is a growing conviction that inventions of both customs and things proceed from prior inventions, just as life springs from life, and that the sooner we recognize the fact that in the study of arts, institutions,language, knowledge, customs, religions, and races of men, we must always apply the methods and instrumentalities of the biologist, the sooner will our beloved science stand upon an immovable foundation.

There is a disposition to magnify the importance museum specimens. The valuable thing about them is the knowledge we acquire concerning them. A museum is an encyclopedia, with specimens instead of pictures. I hold, and would emphasize, the opinion that the explorer who goes among a people to study their entire creed and activity will do his work better by having in his mind the determination to bring each industry into comparison with the same activities in other times and places.

There is one thought which should always be borne in mind in considering the biological method of treating the ethnological material. In the natural world some beings are monorganic, others are polyorganic. It is so in the history of human inventions, therefore in the arrangement of in the arrangement of specimens there are things which must always appear in sets. No one should thing of separating a suit of clothing, a full-rigged vessel, the entire outfit of the arrow-maker, potter, weaver or other craftsman. Professor Putnam would not think of separating the entire contents of a mound. Each of these things mentioned is a polyorganic unit whose parts are just as much related as the parts of the human body.

In conclusion, it is but just to remark that during the two years in which I have had charge of the department of ethnology in the national museum, I have given no attention as yet

to the west coast of America from California to Mount St. Elias. To this fact, and not to any fault in my system, must be attributed the difficulty which Dr. Boas encountered in studying our material in comparison with his own from that region.

O. T. Mason

Washington, May 30

The response to Boas' second salvo came not from Mason, but from John Wesley Powell, who as Director of the Bureau of Ethnology was the effective leader of the Washington anthropological establishment. Whether it was Mason who called the exchange to his attention is not specified, but the opening line suggests that someone was calling in the heavy artillery.

Museums of ethnology and their classification

The article of Dr. Boas, to which you call attention in your note to myself, treats of two distinct subjects: first, the interpretation of similarities; and, second, the best method of grouping archeological objects in the museum. In Professor Mason's report the same subjects are discussed. The interpretation question has but a very remote connection with the museum question, and as I have already discussed it somewhat at length in the 'Third annual report of the bureau of ethnology,' under the head of 'Activital similarities,' I think I may well neglect that subject in this short communication.

The functions of a museum are twofold: first, as a repository of materials for the investigator; second as an objective exemplification of some system of knowledge pertaining to the subject for which the collection is made, to be used by an instructor with his pupils, and as an exhibition of facts for the passing observer who visits the museum.

The first purpose is of prime importance: the history of museum administration abundantly develops this fact, and more and more is its value understood. It is in this manner that great museums make substantial contributions to science, and increase the knowledge of the world. The successful management of a museum for this purpose involves the study of museum cases and various other appliances and devices, together with museum records, descriptive catalogues, etc. In the performance of this function the methods and appliances of the national museum are of the highest excellence, but it would require a volume to fully set them forth. Professor Baird, one of the greatest organizing minds of the scientific world, has devoted a large part of his life to this subject.

The secondary use of a museum, mentioned above, somewhat interferes with its primary use; and because it is secondary it must not be allowed to interfere with the more important function. In a great museum like that at the national capital, the collections are so vast that the public exhibition of them all is impossible; only a very small per cent can be shown with reasonable expenditure. This being the case, the secondary use interferes with the primary use only to a limited extent. A few selections are made to be shown to the public: the great mass of material is kept ready to do service for the investigator. Therefore, with regard to the arrangement of the materials for the museum for public exhibition, the question is narrowed down to this: first, on what principles shall the

selections be made? and, second, in what order shall they be arranged? That is the administrator of the museum is called upon to determine what is the most useful lesson to the general public which his materials can be made to teach. Every investigator will be more or less likely to consider his own subject of prime importance, as it is to himself; and every instructor is, in like manner, likely to consider that his system of instruction is of prime importance. As research progresses, one set of problems after another comes to the front, and is for the time being of chief importance. For such reasons the museum appliances for exhibition should be of an easily adjustable kind. No sound philosophic scholar, be he investigator or instructor, will assert that his own system is complete and final, that any classification or arrangement is ultimate. It is in view of these facts that the authorities of the national museum have devoted their efforts very largely to methods of exhibition, to the consideration of cases, trays, stands for mounting, etc. so as to have the parts interchangeable and easily adjusted to new conditions,--new facts arising from the advancement of the science and from the enrichment of the collections; and it seems to me that many problems involved have been very satisfactorily solved. the actual exhibition portion of the collection in the national museum has not been put into permanent shape. What has been done has been experimental and tentative. The arrangement at one time may be very different from that of another, and this is rendered easy and inexpensive by reason of the system above described.

Now, Dr. Boas offers a system or plan for the arrangement of the materials which relate to the pre-Columbian peoples of America and their descendants. He would have them arranged by tribes. On the discovery of America there were probably more than twenty-five thousand tribes inhabiting the country, each a little band of people organized into a body-politic, and autonomous, at least for all domestic purposes. But probably within the first year, changes were made in some of these bodies-politic: some coalesced by treaty or conquest, others divided through disagreement, individuals from some tribes took up their abode and became incorporated with other tribes; and so, by various methods from time to time, all of these bodies-politic were in a flux; so that a hundred years after the discovery of America it is not probable that there existed any one tribe which could claim to be the pure and simple descendant, without loss, admixture, or change, of any tribe existing at the time of the discovery. these changes have been going on more and more rapidly until the present time, and they are still going on. Most of the tribes best known to history have been absorbed, consolidated, and redivided again and again. Now, this means simply that under primitive and under modern conditions alike there has been no permanent tribal organization,--a body-politic whose history can be followed as that of one people by hereditary descent. A museum collected to represent the tribes of America, therefore, to be properly representative, would have to be collected as the census of the native inhabitants of India has been taken, all in one day, by an army of collectors. Collected in any other way, it would have no proper significance; and collected in the manner suggested, it would have very little scientific value.

But if a classification of the tribes of North America were possible, the archeologic collections actually made in the country could not be relegated to them, for the tribes have been forever migrant. The materials are derived from a variety of sources, which may be briefly enumerated as follows. First, those taken from the mounds. But we now know that many tribes have erected mounds, and ofttimes the same mounds have been occupied by different tribes belonging even to different linguistic stocks. Only a few mounds have been or can be relegated

to the Indians who built them. Second, another class of materials has been found in stone graves, ossuaries, and other burial-places; but it is rarely the case that these burial-places can be referred to the specific tribes that used them. Third, much of the material is distributed on the surface of the earth, and picked up in woods, fields, caves, etc.; but it is very rarely indeed that any of this material can be referred to specific tribes. Then there is a vast body of material in the ruins of the arid regions of the west, very little of which can be relegated to specific tribes. Again collections have been made from time to time, in the years and centuries past, from the Indians themselves; but as these tribes have been ever changing, as heretofore remarked, and as the names of tribes change from time to time, so that the synonymy is exceedingly complex and difficult, the same names being used for different tribes, and the same tribe being known by different names, there is not historical collection of any magnitude in the land that could with confidence be affirmed as coming from definite, specified tribes. Again, very many of the articles which are brought together in a large archeological museum are the materials of barter from tribe to tribe. This barter has been on a scale so extensive, that, if there were no other difficulties in the way of determining the inventors and makers, this would be sufficient to cast a doubt upon nearly all collections made. There is yet another source that contaminates much of the material collected, and puzzles the student of archeology to the highest degree. Stone implements, shell ornaments, copper implements, utensils, etc. were, in the early history of the country, manufactured on a large scale by traders, to be bartered with the Indians for peltries. A vast amount of this material was thus manufactured; and, because it was more or less superior to the work of the Indians themselves, it intrudes its way before all other objects into the collections of the country.

It will be see, that, taking all things together, a tribal arrangement of the archeological museum of North America is an impossibility by reason of its nature.

But the tribal museum as suggested by Dr. Boas would, in practical affairs, be an impossibility by reason of its magnitude. In the many thousand groups of which it would be composed, the objective material would be duplicated over and over again, and to the observer would be monotonous and meaningless.

But may not the tribes be classified? The so-called "ethnic" classifications of mankind have usually been based upon physical characteristics, found in the relative proportions of the parts of the body, which has led to a high development of anthropometry; in the characteristics of the cranium, which has led to a high development of craniology;and in the color of the skin, the texture of the hair, the attitude of the eyes, etc.; but no thorough classification of mankind on these characteristics has ever been established. This only has been done: a greater or lesser number of varieties have been described as types; but, whenever the attempt has been made to relegate the peoples of the world to these varietal types, the task has been found impossible. Mankind cannot be classified into races thoroughly inclusive and exclusive. Very much more has been done in the classification of languages; but this furnishes a very imperfect classification of peoples. In fact, it does not properly mean an ethnic classification. I know of now attempt to classify mankind by arts, or by institutions, or by opinions, worthy of mention; yet arts may be classified, institutions may be classified, and opinions or philosophies may be classified, but the results are in no proper sense a classification of peoples.

In this connections it is sufficient to say that, as there is and can be no ethnic classification of the tribes of America, so there can be no classification of their arts on that

basis. Yet we might classify their arts in a museum on the basis of classes derived from linguistic affinities; but it would be wholly arbitrary, and lead to no valuable results. The Paiutes of Utah, the Comanches of the plains, and six of the Pueblos of New Mexico, that are called by the bureau of ethnology the 'Shinumos,' and included in the ancient province of Tusayan, all belong to the same linguistic family; but their arts are most diverse, as will readily occur to anyone familiar with the subject. The Apaches of Arizona and New Mexico would be thrown into a group with the Tinne Indians in the region of Lake Athabasca. And like illustrations might be extended to an indefinite length.

Dr. Boas suggests a geographic distribution in a manner which makes it appear that he considers a geographic classification to be essentially the same as an ethnographic classification, but the two are altogether different things. It is said that prairie-dogs, owls, and rattlesnakes successively occupy certain underground habitations on the plains, but they are not thereby classed as one group in systematic zoology; and he who supposes that the multifarious tribes in one region of America are of the same stock, or can in any proper way be classified as one, has failed to understand the ethnology of the American races. But this leads to the consideration of a classification by geographic provinces, as advocated by Bastian and referred to by Boas. If the primary classification of the museum should have this basis, some very interesting facts would be presented. It is well known that zoölogic provinces and botanical provinces have been defined by various biologists, and the facts connected therewith are of great interest. In like manner the art provinces of North America are of great interest. To this subject the bureau of ethnology, under my charge, has given much attention, and gradually we are reaching some interesting results; and at the present stage of this research, if we could have a grand museum arranged on this basis, investigations would be made with greater ease, and perhaps facts and ideas would be suggested which will not be discovered in the lack of such aa grand museum. Yet I should hesitate to affirm that that was the best arrangement for the national museum or any other great collection.

The human activities which characterize mankind may be classed as arts, institutions, languages, and opinions or philosophies. Of these activities, the arts only can be represented in a museum, and they but in part. An anthropological museum, therefore, is an impossibility; but we may have a museum of arts, including the arts industrial and aesthetic. But while such a museum might be possible, it is impracticable, for a collection of the arts of all peoples of all times would be of such magnitude that it could not properly be made and preserved within practical conditions of economy. That which the great institutions of the world really attempt is an archeological museum,--a museum of the antiquities of the higher races, and of the past and present of the lower races. In the administration of such a museum it may be considered best to segregate a part thereof for exhibition, as indicated in a previous part of this letter; but their arrangement by tribes on ethic characteristics of any kind is an impossibility. Their arrangement by geographic districts is possible, but the lessons taught thereby are not of prime importance, and the cost of such an exhibition would be excessively expensive,--quite out of proportion to the value of the results. The scientific or technologic classification is all that remains, and this has yet to be developed.

Will the editor of Science indulge me in one more remark, as a corollary to what I have said?

There is a science of anthropology, composed of subsidiary sciences, which I group as

follows: the biology of man, which is the study of the animal man, and may be considered as belonging to biology proper, or anthropology; there is a science of psychology, which is part of anthropology; there is a science of technology, which includes all the arts of mankind; there is a science of sociology, which includes all the institutions of mankind; there is a science of philology, which includes the languages of mankind; and there is a science of philosophy, which includes the opinions of mankind; but there is no science of ethnology, for the attempt to classify mankind in groups has failed on every hand. Perhaps the most distinctive group of men yet discovered in the world are the Eskimos. They have in a general way physical characteristics which separate them from other peoples, but these distinctions fade out on the western coast of America and the eastern coast of Asia. They have arts peculiar to an arctic habitat, but their arts are not exclusively their own. Their institutions are yet practically unknown. Their opinions, as represented in their mythologies, are imperfectly known, but they yet furnish no characteristics by which they can be segregated from many other peoples; and Mr. Dall has shown that their languages are not wholly unconnected with other languages of the north. But when the attempt is made to set up other races in the world, it wholly fails. The unity of mankind is the greatest induction of anthropology.

J. W. Powell

Washington, June 11.

Powell's letter is reprinted from Science 9:612-14, which also contains Boas' final comment (not reproduced in The Shaping of American Anthropology). Because Powell controlled major research funding in anthropology (on which Boas was in part dependent during the next decade), Boas may have felt it advisable to back off from the engagement, emphasizing that "in regard to several points" at issue, "there was no difference of opinion between Major Powell and myself." Insisting that he had not been talking about archeological collections, he "fully" agreed with Powell's "remarks on this subject." But on the problem of classification of tribes and "the alleged impossibility of arranging a tribal museum," he stood his ground, insisting that such an arrangement had been used in "numerous museums."

What seemed particularly striking in my most recent reading of this text was an inversion of prior intellectual expectations. Powell, who in other contexts seems an evolutionary dogmatist, comes across here as a nominalistic historicist, arguing the evanescent character of tribal entities, insisting on the unity of humankind and the impossibility of ethnic or racial classification --denying even the possibility of the science to which his Bureau was ostensibly devoted. In contrast, Boas, who in other contexts (and at points in this debate) was a nominalist critic of evolutionary categories, appears, in the implicative reflective light of Powell's argument, an ethnic essentialist, insisting on the enduring psychic character of each "people": "each stage in the development of a people leaves its stamp, which cannot be destroyed by future events" (in Stocking 1974: 64).

One might interpret the inversion as a manifestation of polemical opportunism--a piece of nominalist artillery dragged out to destroy the foundational basis of a critical assault. But at another level, it is quite consistent with the secondary role which diffusionism often played in

evolutionary argument. When the primitive universality of animism was attacked by Lang with the evidence of presumed Australian Aboriginal monotheism, Tylor insisted that the missionary diffusion of Christian belief would explain the evolutionary anomaly (Stocking 199x). Although the polemical context here is quite different, diffusion plays what is in a sense an analogous role: by undercutting the the possibility of a competing classification, it cleared the field for an evolutionary one. And it is worth noting also, as confirmation of the tension between evolutionary thought and a pluralist view of culture, that in attacking the possibility of any ethnic classification, Powell in effect rejected the idea that those evanescent tribal groups might each have had "a culture"; culture, for him, would seem instead to be a singular phenomenon that inhered in the overall classific sequence of "opinions or philosophies." In contrast, what might appear in Boas defense of tribal museums as an essentialization of human differences reflects instead the Herderian interest in "the genius of a people" which led in his case not to "race" but to a pluralistic anthropological view of "culture." And when it comes to the ideological implications of their museological commitments, the unexpected inversion resolves itself, and ethnocentrism and relativism resume their expected places. For Mason and Powell, the goal of museum exhibition was to demonstrate progress: the progress of anthropology, the progress of science, the progress of human culture, especially manifest in that of late Victorian Euro-America civilization which had replaced all those evanescent "tribes" which for the three centuries since "the discovery" had wandered over the American landscape without ever establishing themselves as permanent "bodies politic." For Boas, in contrast, the goal of museum exhibition was to demonstrate for late Victorian Euro-Americans that "civilization is not something absolute, but that it is relative, and that our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes." If his notion of the tribe implied a certain essentialization of the culture of each ethnic group, it was to the end of defending a diversity of human value orientations would could not easily be arranged in a progressive sequence. A century further on, one might note also the differing implications of their positions for the repatriation of Native American cultural property: given Powell's assumptions about the discontinuity of cultural historical processes, it would be harder to justify the claim of any particular present group to objects generated in the past.

The immediate sequelae of the debate are also worthy of brief consideration. It can be argued that participants on both sides in fact responded to the issues raised by their antagonists. Mason's move from evolutionary sequential to culture area arrangment has been previously noted. Evident in germ in the checkerboard proposal, which he had already actually sought to implement in 1886, it was elaborated in the early 1890s when Mason turned to ethnic "life-group" exhibits as the primary form of museum display, under the influence of William Henry Holmes--but in the context, one may assume, of his awareness of the option advanced by Boas (cf. Hinsley 1981: 97, 100). In the meantime, Boas used his own version of the method of adhesions advanced by Tylor in 1888 in an attempt to establish the reconstruction of tribal histories within particular cultural areas on a more reliable basis--an enterprise which may be read as a response to the arguments of Powell in 1887.

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